



Web 2.0, UGC, and citizen journalism: Revisiting South Korea's *OhmyNews* model in the age of social media



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the discourses of citizen journalism by critically evaluating the notion of Web 2.0. The utopian concept referring to the second generation of the Web nicely captures the new era when more information is generated by average people than by professionals. An uncritical application of the framework, however, has caused a serious misunderstanding of citizen journalism as “amateur journalism.” Analyzing South Korea’s unique experiment with *OhmyNews*, this paper argues that citizen journalism cannot be understood in terms of “user-generated content (UGC)” in general. It also suggests that finding a viable model of citizen journalism is one thing, and making it work is quite another. By comparing *OhmyNews Japan* with its original Korean counterpart, it sheds light on how the same model can yield completely different results. In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of social, cultural, and symbolic considerations.

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1. Introduction

Announcing the “Person of the Year” has been *Time*’s tradition since 1927. The year 2006 was no different. In that year, however, the newsmagazine’s choice was rather unusual. The cover featured a white desktop bearing a striking resemblance to Apple’s iMac. No, it was not Steve Jobs who was selected. Neither was the machine itself. The computer had already enjoyed the honor of being named the “Machine of the Year” over two decades earlier.

Peculiar was the computer monitor printed on the cover; its surface was covered with a mirror-like reflective film. Below the desktop was the headline, big and bold: “You.” It went on: “Yes, you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world.” The provocative message sounded like the manifestation of Web 2.0, which some believe “makes the traditional producer–consumer model obsolete.” (Minguillón et al., 2011: 29) As one of the vivid examples of major players of the brave new world, the cover story introduced an unlikely journalist:

Kim Hye Won doesn’t look like a journalist [. . .] Kim looks like a 45-year-old Korean housewife, which is what she is. More and more journalists are starting to look like her. Kim is a citizen reporter for a South Korean website called *OhmyNews*. There is nothing quite like *OhmyNews* in the U.S., or not yet. Imagine if the *Washington Post* were produced entirely by bloggers. *OhmyNews* is written mostly by a floating staff of 47,000 amateur journalists all over the country. The site gets 1 million to 1.5 million page views a day.

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“Every Citizen Is a Reporter.” Under this motto was launched *OhmyNews* in 2000 with a handful of staff and a meager budget. The idea was simple: receiving and publishing stories from average people. The concept may no longer be shocking, but “citizen journalism” was far from being a household phrase when the news site was unveiled in South Korea (“Korea” hereafter). In less than a decade and a half, the alternative medium has grown into one of the most influential news outlets in the country, with a 100-person staff and over 80,000 citizen journalists as of 2015, generating millions of page views a day.

The site has been hailed around the world as “the world’s first interactive online newspaper,” “the first successful attempt at citizen journalism,” and even “the future of journalism” (Schroeder, 2004; Veale, 2007; Warner, 2007). However, its success seems exceptional rather than typical. Similar experiments have been conducted in many countries—*OhmyNews Japan*, *Nikkan Berita* (Japan), *Bayosphere*, *Assignment Zero* (United States), and more recently *NowPublic* (Canada), to name a few—but few of them have duplicated the success of the Korean predecessor. All of the above listed media have shut down in spite of having attracted significant attention initially. As the *Guardian* rightly states, “many of the most promising and worthy projects have vaporized” (Kiss and Christie, 2010).

Although success stories are not non-existent, most are still at the experimental stage. Furthermore, many are designed to achieve specific social and political goals rather than everyday journalism. It is difficult to find cases comparable to *OhmyNews*, a comprehensive news source, which has been in operation since the turn of the Millennium. It would be no surprise, then, that there are few academic studies that explore the daily practices of citizen journalism. As Chris Atton (2009: 284) pointed out, most studies emphasize “the democratization of the media and the participation of citizens as part of a progressive political project.”

The limited success of what is called “citizen journalism” is evinced by both qualitative and quantitative studies. For instance, Rebillard and Touboul (2010) suggest that “a digital revolution in journalism does not stand up to empirical verification,” concluding that citizen journalists have failed to bring a meaningful change to the news territory. Ryfe and Mensing (2010: 38) expressed a similar view. According to their analysis, citizen journalists are stuck in “an intellectual rut” where they are “unable to imagine their journalism outside the purposes and conventions of mainstream news.”

Such unfavorable findings may dishearten scholars and media practitioners; even before *Time* magazine put “you” on the cover, the discourse of Web 2.0 had instilled high hopes for the “Connected Age” in which everybody participates in the production of media content (Shirky, 2010). Why has not the dream of Web 2.0 been fulfilled in journalism even when people started talking about the arrival of “Web 3.0,” or the Sematic Web?

On the other hand, everybody seems to be involved in the generation and distribution of content in one way or another. People routinely discuss issues that matter to them on social networking sites, upload photos and videos, and leave reviews and ratings on commercial portals. Does this form of participation count as “citizen journalism”? Or should journalism be defined more narrowly? Why has *OhmyNews*-style journalism been embraced so differently with such wildly varying degrees of success? This paper seeks to answer these questions.

Based on the critical evaluation of the Web 2.0 framework, this study investigates journalism by revisiting Korea’s unique experiment. By comparing *OhmyNews Japan* with its original Korean counterpart, it aims to shed light on how the same model has led to contrasting results under different social conditions.

This paper is particularly interested in symbolic aspects of participation. In Korea and Japan, for instance, “citizen,” “journalist” and “news” have very different connotations, shaping the separate fates of citizen journalism. It argues that the possibilities and limitations of citizen journalism cannot be assumed without specific social, political, and historical contextualization.

2. Methodology

This paper combines macro and micro approaches. For the big picture, the discourses of citizen journalism will be over-viewed briefly to show general patterns of the emerging form of journalism. It is an attempt to reveal the unique aspects of *OhmyNews* by comparing it to other similar projects. To attain this objective, the relevance of the theory of “Web 2.0” will be examined through literature review. This theoretical inquiry will provide the basis for specific case studies.

The main purpose of this essay is to throw light on how citizen journalism is perceived and accepted differently in different countries, and how the varying attitudes are influenced by sociocultural factors. The best way to find the clues would be hearing directly from the contributors. So this study analyzes their own testimonials to see what meanings the participants assign to their reporting activities and identity as journalist. To attain this objective, various forms of written statements have been collected from *OhmyNews*’s annual forums, online bulletin boards, and online and print publications.

3. Journalism in the UGC era

When *Time*’s mirrored cover hit the newsstands in 2006, some criticized its dramatic celebration of ordinary citizens, dismissing the choice as a sales gimmick. It was not the news magazine alone, however, that put a spotlight on average people. In the same year, the aptly named magazine *Business 2.0* put “You!” at the top of the list of the “50 Who Matter Now.” It explained the rationale for the selection: “the consumer as creator.” ABC News made a similar decision two years earlier, choosing bloggers as the “People of the Year.”

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